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The placing of identity and the identification of place: ‘Place identity’ in community lifeboating

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Abstract

This paper explores the symbiotic relationship between place and identity. On one hand it asks what role place plays in the formation of identity. On the other hand it asks how place itself is invested with meaning by actors. This theoretical concept of ‘place-identity’ is analysed through the case of volunteer lifeboaters in the Republic of Ireland, to illustrate how place itself is socially constructed so as to acquire a range of social meanings which interact in a recursive relationship with identity over time. The particularity of dangerous maritime places is shown to shape identity, whilst those places are shown to be bound up with a mosaic of other factors (such as history, family and community) which make them meaningful. The paper theorizes a more social, temporal and dynamic relationship between place and identity than is offered by extant literature, and offers refinements to the concept of place-identity.

Keywords

Identity, place, space, place-identity, community, tradition, lifeboating.

Introduction

“Whatever is true for space and time, this much is true for place: we are immersed in it and could not do without it. To be at all – to exist in any way – is to be somewhere, and to be somewhere is to be in some kind of place...we live in places, relate others to them, die in them. Nothing we do is unplaced” (Casey, 1997, p. ix).

What role does place play in the development, formation and maintenance of identity, and how is the meaning of place constructed by social actors? Within the management and organizational studies (MOS) literature there has been extensive attention given to issues of identity construction and maintenance, but considerably less focus on the place in which this happens and the social meanings of place for organization members. This a deficiency because ‘the places in which organizational life occurs can have profound impacts on actors, actions, and outcomes’ (Guthey, Whiteman, & Elmes, 2014; Lawrence & Dover, 2015, p. 371). Following Tuan (1977), we refer to place as “a physical area offering shelter, stability, attachment and meaningful symbols to people” (cited in Courpasson, Dany, & Delbridge, 2017, p. 238). In this paper, we take up Knights and Clarke’s (2017, p. 337) invitation to look sideways to alternative literatures so as to follow “the road less travelled” in identity research, meaning the provision of accounts which are vivid and embodied. In this case, this means exploring the relationship between identity and place in organizations. “Place-identity” is a concept developed in environmental psychology and social geography to convey the sense of personal attachment to geographically locatable places through which “a person acquires a sense of belonging and purpose which gives meaning to his or her life” (Proshansky, Fabian, & Kaminoff, 1983, p. 60). Those literatures conceptualise a sense of rootedness (Relph, 1976) and attachment (Altman & Low, 1992; Gerson, Stueve, & Fisher, 1977; Knez, 2005; Kyle, Graefe, & Manning, 2005) to denote the affective and emotional relationships that individuals form with specific places (Kyle et al., 2005).

In this paper, we argue that the concept of place-identity has the potential to enrich and contextualise studies of identity, and our theoretical contribution lies in developing an explanation of how identities are formed and maintained through contingent relations with particular local, cultural and historical conditions (Kenny, Whittle, & Willmott, 2011). In doing so, we open up the concept of space to explore the ontology of place – place typically means specific geographical location, but as we will show, *place itself is socially constructed so as to acquire a range of social meanings which interact in a recursive relationship with identity over time*. Place, then, is simultaneously concrete and ambiguous – a specific physical location and also “a geographical space that has acquired meaning as a result of a person’s interaction with the space” (Hauge, 2007, p. 45, cf. Tuan, 1977). This is important because the social processes through which collective constructions of place emerge have deep significance for identification patterns across social structures and praxis in organizations. If identity is about who and what to be - how a person makes sense of themselves in relation to others – and if “questions of ‘who we are’ are often intimately related to questions of ‘where we are’” (Dixon & Durrheim, 2000, p. 27), then interrogating issues of identity and embeddedness in specific spatial locations – places – is necessary in order to develop nuanced understandings of important organizational behaviours such as identification. Indeed, as our study shows, identification with place-identity may well be crucial for community-based organizations’ recruitment of volunteers and long-term survival.

To that end, this paper addresses two related questions. First, what role does place play in the development, formation and maintenance of identity? If identity is about “who am I?” how does place influence this? Second, in acknowledging that places and spaces are constitutive of social praxis (Duarte, 2017; Herod, Rainnie, & McGrath-Champ, 2007; Kornberger & Clegg, 2004), how is place itself constructed and made meaningful by actors? Underlying this question is a recognition that place is not a self-evident or simple matter of a particular geographical

location which then impacts upon identity (Daskalaki, Butler, & Petrovic, 2016). Rather, place is itself formed and maintained so as to have a social meaning (Manzo, 2003, 2005). In other words, spatial patterns are ‘not just an outcome [of social relations but are] part of the explanation of these relations’ (Herod et al., 2001, p. 248, cf. Massey, 1984). As we will show, it is in this way that place is understood as differing from space.

In advancing place-identity research we join a small but growing group of management scholars who argue that place is a key element in understandings of identity formation and maintenance (Brown & Humphreys, 2006; Calvard, 2015; Elsbach, 2003; Gill & Larson, 2014; Larson & Pearson, 2012; Rooney, Paulson, & Callan, 2010), and seek to respond to the call from Calvard (2015, p. 654) for “more humanistic, ecological understandings of how workers occupy and make use of various places for supporting their well-being and sense of self”. Our article contributes to theory by showing the intertwining and recursive nature of place with other salient identity resources such as (in this case) family, community and tradition, and demonstrating how these cultural resources interconnect and combine to provide a sense of rootedness, coherence and distinctiveness for organizational members. These deeply meaningful attachments enable the voluntary organization at the centre of our empirical investigation to survive (in terms of recruiting workers, fundraising, and carrying out its operational mission).

Our substantive contribution in this paper is thus three-fold. Using empirical data from a study at the Royal National Lifeboat Institution (RNLI), a community-based lifeboating organization, we elaborate and enrich theory about meanings of place-identity. In line with Guthey et al. (2014, p. 10), we argue that place as a theoretical concept is only meaningful when attention is given to the specific meanings attached to it. Second, by blending (Oswick, Fleming, & Hanlon, 2011) established insights of identity theory from MOS with conceptual resources from the

environmental psychology and social geography literatures, we demonstrate how subjective attachment to a particular locality, a specific place, can operate to ‘form, repair, maintain and revise’ identities (McInnes & Corlett, 2012, p. 27), and affect organizational identification in unusual ways. This compliments and extends organizational research on space (e.g. Taylor & Spicer, 2007) and offers empirical insight to how individuals develop particular subjective relationships to places. Our third substantive contribution is to establish the *recursive* nature of the relationship between place and identity – moving beyond the existing psychological foci that characterise those other disciplines (e.g. Jorgenson & Stedman, 2001; Proshansky et al., 1978; Twigger-Ross & Uzzell, 1996) we further scholarly understanding by theorizing a more social, temporal and dynamic relationship between place and identity, showing how place sits within an irreducible mosaic of sources and resources through which identity is constructed and maintained.

In pursuit of this, the paper is organized as follows. We begin with a brief overview of the issues and literature concerned with identity construction, place and space and introduce from the environmental psychology and social geography literatures the theoretical concept of ‘place-identity’. We then introduce the research site and describe our research methods. The next section presents detailed empirical material showing how place interacts with identity and how within that interaction issues of family, community and tradition are key. A concluding discussion explores the implications for the study of place-identity.

Theoretical framing: identity, place and place-identity

Identity

The idea that identity is related to place is an intuitive, familiar one: “where are you from?” is a common way of identifying – or “placing” - someone. Yet familiar as it may be, embedded

within this idea are matters of considerable complexity (e.g. Courpasson et al., 2017; de Vaujany & Vaast, 2014). Questions of identity construction have become increasingly prevalent in management and organization studies in the past two decades (Brown, 2001; Coupland & Brown, 2012), with researchers seeking explanations for the development, maintenance, and consequences of managerial, professional, organizational and vocational identities (e.g. Alvesson, Ashcraft, & Thomas, 2008; Brown, 2015; Bunderson & Thompson, 2009; Grey, 1994). Indeed, identity “is viewed as central for issues of meaning and motivation, commitment, loyalty, logics of action and decision-making, stability and change, leadership, group and intergroup relations, organizational collaborations etc.” (Svenningson & Alvesson, 2003, p. 1163; see also Ravasi & Canato, 2013). Research on identity has been conducted at various analytical levels; individual (e.g. Pratt, Rockmann, & Kaufman, 2006; Svenningson & Alvesson, 2003) interpersonal (e.g. Creed, DeJordy, & Lok, 2010; Pratt, 1998) and collective (Tajfel & Turner, 1986), and through a variety of methods with divergent and overlapping ontological assumptions.

Without reviewing what has become an enormous literature deploying a variety of theoretical resources (see Kenny et al., 2011), the overall tenor of this body of research is to recognize that identity is not a monolithic or fixed aspect of character or personality but is produced through the interplay of internal and external influences and resources that answer, or seem to answer, the fundamental question “who am I?” (Gill & Larson, 2014).

Place and space

Within that process, we argue, one available resource is that of place – the “where” within which “I am”. However, to call it a “resource” is not to imply something inert or passive. For, as we will show, “place is not merely a setting or backdrop, but an agentic player in the game – a force with detectable and independent effects on social life” (Gieryn, 2000, p. 466). And

indeed, MOS scholars have made some efforts (albeit diverse and fragmented) to theorize the located subject. At a collective level of analysis, Brown and Humphreys' (2006) study demonstrates how staff in a recently merged college drew on discursive shared understandings of place to inform their identity accounts and promote their groups' perceived interests. Their article focuses largely on organizational identity and the political attempts of various groups to claim and define their organization in particular ways. Wapshott and Mallet's (2011) theoretical piece employs a Lefebvrian approach to analysing homeworking, and their concern is thus on the meanings given to domestic space (but not necessarily to identity). Larson and Pearson (2012) and Gill and Larson (2014) conceptualise place as a discursive resource for the making of entrepreneurial occupational identities in the United States. Their work highlights the interplay between transcendent (e.g. national) and locale-specific (e.g. Silicon Valley) discourses in creating the "ideal entrepreneurial self" (Gill & Larson, 2014, p. 519). At a higher level of abstraction, both Calvard (2015) and Lawrence and Dover (2015) argue for a process model for an organizing sense of place in working lives, and in recent insightful articles Panayiotou and Kafiris (2011) and Courpasson et al. (2017) call for better theorizations of place in understanding the production and consumption of resistance.

It is important to note that space and place, although interwoven, are conceptually different. Drawing on Hirsch and Levin (1999), Taylor and Spicer (2007) suggest the umbrella term "organizational spaces" to signify the "various locations that organization and management can be analysed through". Their work suggests three relatively distinct sets of scholarly thought on space: space as distance (e.g. Baum & Mezias, 1992; Hatch, 1987), space as materialized power relations (e.g. Collinson & Collinson, 1997; Sewell & Wilkinson, 1992) and space as experience (e.g. Cairns, 2002; Gagliardi, 1990; Yanow, 1998). It is the latter, which draws on symbolism, aesthetics, actors, interpretation and discourses and lends itself to examination through interpretive research methods, which most speaks to our concerns here.

The sociologist Thomas Gieryn proposes that “space is what place becomes when the unique gathering of things, meanings, and values are sucked out” (2000, p. 465). Place in this sense is a subset of space, with space “arguably being more abstract, factual, geometric, far-reaching, physical, and/or nomothetic” (Calvard, 2015, p. 655). In a similar way, Larson and Pearson conceptualise place as “space infused with people, objects, symbols and meaning” (2012, p. 245). Our research will empirically demonstrate how spaces *become* places when imbued with social and cultural meaning. Thus understood, there is a direct and reciprocal connection between place and identity. On the one hand place can be seen as part of “how the images and representations (physical, symbolic, verbal, textual, and behavioural) become imbued with meaning and are taken as being part of one’s identity” (Beech, 2008, p. 52). On the other hand, identity is part of *how* a space becomes socially transformed, mobilized and produced into a place (Calvard, 2015; Cresswell, 2004; Panayiotou & Kafiris, 2011); not just somewhere but, specifically, here. Our research contributes to both sides of this enquiry – how place itself is socially constructed, and indeed, how identity is constructed in relation to place.

Bringing “place-identity” in

Thus we draw upon and seek to “blend” (Oswick et al., 2011) MOS with the theoretical concept of “place-identity” derived from the environmental psychology and social geography literatures, where it has a relatively long and detailed heritage. Fundamentally, place-identity research seeks to explore “the role of place in the creation and formation of identity”, elucidating various “self-within-place” contextualisations and outcomes (Hugh-Jones & Madill, 2009, p. 601). Various constructs such as place attachment (Altman & Low, 1992; Hildago & Hernandez, 2001), sense of place (Hay, 1998a, 1998b; Jorgensen & Stedman, 2001), place dependence (Stokols & Shumaker, 1981), rootedness (Tuan, 1980) and insideness (Relph, 1976) have been developed to try and capture the range of meanings that stakeholders

ascribe to their physical location. Indeed, it was in response to the perceived indifference of mainstream psychology to the importance of the physical environment for identity development that the term “place-identity” was proposed by Proshansky et al. (1978) as:

“A sub-structure of the self-identity of the person consisting of, broadly conceived, cognitions about the physical world in which the individual lives. These cognitions represent memories, ideas, feelings, attitudes, values, preferences, meanings, and conceptions of behaviour and experience which relate to the variety and complexity of physical settings that define the day-to-day existence of every human being. At the core of such physical environment-related cognitions is the 'environmental past' of the person; a past consisting of places, spaces and their properties which have served instrumentally in the satisfaction of the person's biological, psychological, social, and cultural needs” (Proshansky et al., 1983, p. 59).

However, thus conceived, place-identity has been subsequently criticised for promoting an overly individualistic and apolitical concept of place (Dixon & Durrheim, 2000) which disregards the central significance of place in other identity categories such as class, gender, family and other social roles (Breakwell, 1983, 1986). These criticisms serve to remind us that the link between place and identity is one which is temporally and socially located and relates to the way “we weave meaning around our past, present and future” (Kenny et al., 2011, p. 16). Place has a meaning for identity, but what place *itself* means is made from other things which have developed over time. Thus:

“There is the specificity of place which derives from the fact that each place is the focus of a distinct mixture of wider and more local social relations. There is the fact that this very mixture together in one place may produce effects which would not have happened otherwise. And finally, all these relations interact with and take a further element of specificity from the accumulated history of a place, with that history itself imagined as the product of layer upon layer of different sets of linkages, both local and to the wider world” (Massey, 1995, p. 156, cf. Massey, 1994)

From this discussion of the existing literature, we take an understanding of place both as a potential source of identity but also as something made up of historically accreted social

meaning. This is the crucial theoretical framing for our empirical analysis, because it means that we have to be attentive not (or not simply) to place as a kind of “thing” to be made use of in the construction of identity, but to the active and recursive process through which place and identity are related. Thus when we come to the empirical analysis we will give attention not just to the specificities of place (in this case: “a place by the sea”) but also to the ongoing construction of the meaning of place (in this case: “the place where I grew up/come from”) to capture the relational nature of “here” and “me”. But before coming to that we will explain our research site and methods.

Research Site and Methods

The site for this exploration of place and identity is the Royal National Lifeboat Institution (RNLI). The RNLI is a charity registered in the UK and Ireland with the mission of saving lives at sea (RNLI, 2014) and operates a twenty-four hour per day, 365-days a year lifeboat search and rescue service in 237 strategically-located stations dotted around the coasts of the UK and Ireland. The organization depends on a network of over 31,500 volunteers, of which 4,600 are lifeboat operational crew members (RNLI, 2016). About 8% of operational crew members are female. A permanent paid staff of about 1,476 employees support and oversee operations (RNLI, 2015), the majority of whom are based at headquarters in Poole, in Dorset, England, which is also the site of the Lifeboat Training College, a purpose built state-of-the art training facility for lifeboat crew.

The fleet consists of 349 lifeboats. Overall, lifeboats were launched 8,851 times in 2016, rescuing 8,643 people and saving 431 lives (RNLI, 2016b). The RNLI is different to other emergency services as it is not an organ of the state or an expression of state power, nor has it

ever been so. As a charity, 94% of their total income comes from donations, and local fundraising efforts are crucial in sustaining the service (RNLI, 2017).

At station level, the lifeboat operations manager (LOM) is the head of the operations team, in charge of the day-to-day activities of the station and commands the lifeboat and station when the boat is not at sea. Deputy launching authorities, mechanics, coxswains, crew and shorehelpers comprise the operations team. When the lifeboat is at sea, the coxswain is in charge and is legally responsible for the lifeboat and crew. As a rule, the coxswain is a local navigational expert with many years' experience, and must have completed specialised RNLI training. Due to the offshore nature of the work, there is very little back-up for the crew of a lifeboat if the rescue is very difficult and becomes a life-and-death situation. Occasionally, volunteers are forced to deal with horrendous physical working conditions, such as hurricane force wind, waves and storms. Forty percent of lifeboat services were performed in darkness in 2016, adding to the already dangerous and frightening setting (RNLI, 2016c).

Methods

An exploratory case study approach was adopted, which aimed to study – broadly – the management of community workers and the themes of control, autonomy, identity and meaning (O'Toole & Grey, 2016a, 2016b). This design allowed for the combination of different sources of evidence (Yin, 2009) such as interview data, documentary data and participant and non-participant observation. Taking this approach also allowed us access to a variety of responses, and with these, the opportunity to engage with “a particular sensitivity towards the possibility of variation and contradiction, and its meanings and consequences” (Kärreman & Alvesson, 2004, p. 155).

The main research method was a programme of forty-three semi-structured interviews which were conducted with individuals at all levels of the organization, and in seven different geographical locations across Ireland and the UK. Interviews were semi-structured and open-ended in order to allow respondents to expand on those issues that they felt were most significant and meaningful. Each interview commenced with “life history” questions, asking participants to trace back their involvement with the organization, how and why they had come to join the organization and what happened when they joined (Kirton, 2006; Musson, 1998). In line with the understanding (discussed above) of identity as neither fixed nor given, interviewees were “encouraged to talk about their life, feelings, family and work” (Fraher & Gabriel, 2014, p. 932). Interviews lasted from fifteen minutes to three hours, with an average of fifty minutes per interview and took place at five local stations (coxswains, operations managers, launch authorities, mechanics and crew members) in the organization’s headquarters (directors and senior management) and at a divisional base (divisional management and staff). All interviews were digitally audio recorded and transcribed within two weeks of the interview occurring.

We were concerned to use a combination of sources to give a “broad and rich picture of the situation concerned” (Alvesson & Deetz, 2000, p. 204) and so further data were collected through participant observation (undertaking an exercise in the simulator) and non-participant observation (sitting-in on a five day management communications and command training course aimed at station management personnel) at the training centre. These processes provided a micro-ethnographic (Wolcott, 1990) element to the research – the second author was immersed in the organization, observed behaviour and asked questions, albeit not for a long time, and was able to balance this with the estrangement “necessary for revealing what is taken for granted” (Czarniawska, 2008, p. 133). These research visits to the training centre and local stations were used as “an opportunity to see the organization at work and to ‘feel’ the

organization” (Parker, 2000, p. 238) and observations were recorded in a research diary. Data were also derived from approximately 850 pages of organizational documents, which provided contextual information on the organization and its history.

Collecting data from multiple sources amounted to a form of triangulation in the data collection phase in terms of our methods of investigation and sources of data. These multiple perceptions were used to clarify meaning by identifying different ways the case was seen (Silverman, 1993) both in our own perceptions and interpretations as a researchers (Alvesson, 2003) and in the communication of our results (Stake, 2005). Upon reviewing the empirical data, notions of place, family and tradition persisted in respondents’ accounts of the formation, maintenance and production of their identities. Obviously, far more data were collected than are presented here, where we discuss selected data relevant to the main premise of this paper. Analysis iterated between the themes emerging from the research and concepts from the literature. Our coding structure and reflexive understanding of the data suggested three sub-themes – family, community and tradition – which build into and reinforce a primary theme of place-identity. Following McMurray and Ward (2014) and Wolfram-Cox and Hassard (2005) our use of the data-set for the purposes of presenting this paper is best described as “holographic convergence” – in the process of collecting, coding and clustering the data from the seven specific research sites, we identify the cases that best describe the dataset through “detailed qualitative description of an individual or situation, supplemented by ample quotation and detailed contextual information”, with a view to constructing pictures of the wider phenomena “contained within the parts” (Wolfram-Cox & Hassard, 2005, p. 118). We now turn to presenting the empirical findings and analysis.

Place-identity in the RNLI

Throughout the interviews, respondents made repeated reference to place in a number of different ways. Place was in some cases the actual word used; other times the word local was used. Almost always reference to place and locality was made in combination with something else such as knowledge about the sea, or family or community, or tradition. In the account that follows we try to disentangle these different usages but it is important to understand that this is somewhat artificial, only done for ease of exposition and in some cases the usages are actually impossible to disentangle. We will return to the significance of that in the discussion but, for now, we will present some of the many ways that place figured in the accounts of the interviewees.

A place by the sea

Although we have been at pains to point out that place is not “just” a physical location, it is important to recognize that it is, also, just that. This has great salience for the RNLI crews and the co-construction of the identity of individuals with place. In maritime culture, expert knowledge equates to first-hand experience in the waters in question, particularly for navigation purposes. Local knowledge of wind, weather, tides, swells, currents, depths and shoals, coastline, sea depth and temperature are crucial to the work of the crews:

“There are no limitations on the all-weather lifeboat. You are putting your life in these guys’ hands, as well as trusting their knowledge. Their knowledge, their *local* knowledge is second to none, so it’s a thing that inspires confidence, and maybe you just want to be like that” (Tom¹, Crewmember, *emphasis in original*)

Without intending any pun, such knowledge serves as an “identity anchor” (Fraher & Gabriel, 2014; Thomas & Linstead, 2002) for claims to expertise and, as shown in this quotation, seen

¹ Pseudonyms are used in the reporting of this research.

as something to aspire to. In other words, an expert mariner is one who, amongst other things, is extremely familiar with a specific place.



Figure 1: RNLI lifeboat at sea off Irish coast. Image reproduced courtesy of RNLI/Nigel Millard.

This has important consequences both for individual identity (i.e. as an expert) but also for the identity of the lifeboat station and its boat:

“I was in Ilfracombe² the other day and it doesn’t say ‘RNLI lifeboat’, it says ‘Ilfracombe lifeboat’. I quite like the fact that there is a fairly strong level of localized branding because that increases localized ownership, which is good for fundraising” (John, RNLI Director)

The identification of the boat with a particular place is commonplace at RNLI stations, and it also informs local fundraising efforts for the boat. This is not just about a link between the

² The actual place name has been changed to protect the anonymity of respondents.

particular boat and the particular place but also about history in that “the boat” can refer to all of its previous incarnations and not just the present one.

Although place most obviously refers to the town or village where the lifeboat station is located, it more extensively references a wider coastal community:

“I suppose with the exception of a few inland stations, they are all on the coast with people who live on the coast, has some kind of connection with the sea, or some of their family do” (Phil, Crewmember)

Here what links “the coast” is, of course, literally “the sea” and it is this specifically maritime place which centrally defines the crews:

“Well their whole livelihood is the sea, their work is the sea. Everything is the sea” (Christy, Coxswain)

And which also creates linkages between the stations so as to make the coast. This organic community building is remarkably important for the RNLI as an organization, and it benefits tremendously from the specific ways in which people construct themselves in relation to it, precisely because the identification that drives our research subjects in their voluntary work does not appear to rely on any direct identification with the formal organization as such:

“I have a fair bit of dealings with my flanking stations...we converse a lot and if we had a problem we would ring each other and we would share the problem and try to tease out the answer to it...so we rely on each other a fair amount, and that again reinforces the feeling that you have somebody behind you, so that sense of family again is reinforced by that” (Pat, Mechanic)

Consistent with the findings of Ybema, Vroemisse, & van Marrewijk (2012), our study suggests that understanding similarities (as opposed to the differences most frequently researched in identity studies) is critical to understanding how organizations are able to function. The shared characteristics across lifeboat stations, regardless of specific physical location, helps these volunteers to work effectively across organizational boundaries. There are therefore a set of connections between being expert mariners through knowledge of the

local sea, the station lifeboat and the wider locale of the coastal lifeboat stations, which transcend the formal organization:

“It is part of being a specialized community. Without a doubt, without a doubt. I mean we had a retirement for our outgoing coxswain last Friday and the place was packed out. There were people there from all over, they just come at their own expense. We pay that out of our own pockets. If there was a funeral, if someone died in Arklow you’d be gone in the car

Interviewer: Why?

It’s a very hard question to answer. I suppose it’s...it’s a family thing. We are part of a family. That would probably be the best answer to give you” (Brendan, Training coordinator)

To understand further how identities are co-constituted with particular places, we continue with a temporal view to try and delicately unpack the mosaic of sources and resources which contribute to these intersubjectivities.

The place where I grew up

The invocation of family in the last quotation was metaphorical, but family in its literal meaning is crucial to the RNLI crews. Almost all of the respondents who were volunteers spoke of their kinship connections to the lifeboat. All of the stations studied had multiple members of the same family involved. One station had six members of the same family, and another had five blood-related members. It was common for respondents to identify a specific family as being a known “lifeboat family” in a particular location. When asked how they first got into lifeboating, respondents almost invariably emphasized that their fathers, uncles, grandfathers, and great-grandfathers had been involved, at varying levels from coxswain to shore helper, in the local lifeboat of their day:

“It’s been in my family going back, my father was a lifeboat man and his father was, it’s been in the family. Something I wanted to do, from the outside looking in ...there is a great family thing here, you know. It’s community-based and from the outside

looking in it looks like a great place to be, and it is” (Mick, Training Coordinator and Second Mechanic)

This quote emphasizes the pre-crewing socialization period of growing up with the lifeboat and suggests an aspirational identity of wanting to be a part of something where generations of his kin had been involved. This can be seen as informing a sense of the ideal self – who one should be, as imagined by significant others. Family as an identity was somewhat determined by place – by virtue of being born in a particular location, one has experience of seeing familial role models put out to sea on the lifeboat. In other words, place is somewhat made by family; but family is somewhat made by place; and both are made over time, through the generations.

Respondents spoke of their involvement as “a thing you inherit” (Ben, Station Chairman), a family tradition passed down the generations. Family is interwoven with the lifeboat stations in another way, too. For it is not unusual for the crews to have to rescue their own family members in these maritime communities:

“Last year I was on call for the weekend and I got a phone call saying a boat had gone down and I was running off with the bit of paper in my hand and on it written the name of my brother’s boat. She had sunk with the two people on board, they were missing” (John Paul, Second coxswain)

Another coxswain in a different station relayed a similar story:

“It could be your family next, someone you know. Like off the head there, the [boat name], when she sunk, everyone aboard that boat bar one I knew. One of them grew up alongside me...you try and help these people...that would bring it home to you more than anything else” (Fiach, Coxswain)

The intimate connection between the lifeboat crews, families and locales has a wider purchase. It extends to local knowledge of more than the sea but of local society. For example, volunteers have to be accepted by the existing crew if they are to join, so when someone comes forward:

“We know who he is and what he’s capable of and we know whether we want him or not. We get a lot of undesirables looking to join the crew who may be...well the last guy who wanted to join us was a junkie. I mean local knowledge just doesn’t apply to going out on the coast, local knowledge applies to who you have coming in the door to join the crew. Normally, because of the way the crews are, local, very local, we know who everybody is around the place. Whether they’re blow-ins or whether they’re locals, you get to know them” (Conor, Coxswain)

This quotation is particularly illuminating in explicitly identifying both maritime and social knowledge as specifically local knowledge, defined in terms of “the place”. This need for local social knowledge is also highly relevant to the actual operations of the lifeboat:

“For any coxswain at any station to think that he can do it alone, the man is on a different planet. You not only need the team, but you need everybody on that team knowing the capability and abilities of all the people around them. You have to implicitly trust everyone around you, they have to know each other’s temperaments, when you know people that well that makes the team. Because you know that person’s strong points, weak points, where you can make them aggressive, you know everything about them, and that’s important that you do. And you know their level of ability as well and you have to know that, because you can’t ask somebody to protect you if you are not sure that they can do it” (Christy, Coxswain)

The interconnections between families and local social knowledge mean that the lifeboat crews can hardly be understood without reference to the (local) community. And, indeed, almost all the interviewees made reference to community. A typical example is:

“What does it mean to me? I suppose giving something back to the community, you know. I am a skipper in my day job, so I am putting back in training, training that I have got myself I am passing it down the line” (Ian, Coxswain)

The community, here, means the local population and the sense of serving and representing that community played a large part in the identity of the crew members. That it did so was not just about what they perceived themselves as doing *for* the community, but the considerable kudos they enjoyed *from* the community:

“People would look up to you, they would recognise you. People in the community would say “it’s a great job that you do”, and they do recognise you and the community have always turned out at any fundraising, they are always 100% behind the organization in this community... not just in this village here, but in the whole south of the county” (Tom, Crewmember)

However, community can also be thought of in the narrower sense of the boat crew itself and here again this operates through a particular place, namely being out at sea. There is an important distinction between the shoreline town as a community and the boat on the water. For one thing, as mentioned earlier, there is a legal distinction since once on the water the boat is governed by maritime law and the Coxswain has ultimate authority, once again transcending the formal power structures of normal organization. For another, the literal separation of the boat from the shore creates a separate social group or community, in a different place:

“Once we are afloat we are a unit away from everybody else. That’s it. We are our own people, we have to make our own decisions. They have to be informed decisions and we are on our own. Absolutely.” (Seán, Coxswain)

A particular issue which makes this offshore community distinct from the wider onshore community is the danger involved and, with it, emotionally powerful experiences:

“We had a chap here last year and he got drowned out there straight across from us and he was a local man and a friend of ours and we went out that morning at four o’clock and recovered him and we brought him home and everyone was emotional but everyone worked together. It’s funny about it you know, you could go away from the harbour and you mightn’t agree that much, but when you go down there and open the door of the boathouse, it seems a whole family thing. Everyone just works together on it.” (Cathal, Crewmember)

There are several points of importance in this quotation. First, it indicates the ever present danger of death at sea which characterises the work and evokes the meaning of the station as a safe haven. There is also the reference to the locality of the dead man. And finally there is confirmation of the idea that once at sea the crew forms a community in a different way from when they are in the harbour.



Figure 2: Irish coastline. Image reproduced courtesy of ©Tourism Ireland.

The place I come from

Implicit within what we have already written is a sense of place being historically located, with the boat, families and communities growing out of and continuing a tradition. The background to this is that dedicated lifeboat services, resourced by harbour boards and independent lifeboat associations began to appear on the UK and Irish coasts in the early 18th century. Although local gentry and coastguard personnel were important in these operations, in almost all cases their backbone was local fishermen and seafarers (Cameron, 2002). Over time, the RNLI assimilated most of these local independent services, but the crews are still aware of this history:

“There was [sic] rescue boats before the RNLI was in existence. And the RNLI took over [this] station in the 1800s. But there was a rescue boat of sorts here long before that, going back God knows how long. And it was like that all around the coast, Britain and Ireland. Well, any coast, anywhere, you will find that if there was a fishing community if somebody got into trouble they would go out and help their own. They had a rescue...if it wasn't a dedicated rescue boat of some sort, they would use the

fishing boats. And it just stems from that. They were standalone. They were in a community” (John Paul, Second coxswain)

This sense of local independence, which we also saw earlier in the idea of a named station boat, means that although there is plenty of pride in and commitment to the RNLI there is an even stronger identification with the local station:

“I don’t work for them because of what the RNLI is in Poole (RNLI HQ). I work for them because I’ve always been a lifeboat man, as I said, from [the age of] 15. I do it because – the same as the rest of them – so that other people are able to live, to help others” (Andrew, Crew member)

That identification links also to a sense of occupational identity (rather like that of being a maritime expert mentioned earlier) as a “lifeboat man” and this intersects with the distinction between commitment to the RNLI and commitment to the local boat. In this sense, and as is implicit in the quote above, examining place-identity also opens up a gap in which to study tensions, clashes, boundaries and differences, and lines of distinction between “inside/outside, membership and non-membership, inclusion and exclusion” (Wenger, 1998, p. 120) in organizations (O’Toole & Grey, 2016a). We have already argued that the RNLI actually benefit from this rather indirect organizational identification, in that the identification which motivates this dangerous voluntary work does not rely on a directly link with the formal organization. In this specific empirical case, the reason for this also lies in history and traditions, specifically the relationship between the RNLI and the Royal Navy, which is now worthy of mention.

The early links to the Royal Navy have been tightened throughout the organization’s 192 year history. At the time of the research the Chairman was an Admiral and the Chief Executive Officer was previously a Vice-Admiral. The Royal Navy background of many staff at headquarters and the particular set of beliefs and values this brings are often interpreted as contributing to the military machine-like design and militaristic command and control ethos. One manager jokingly suggested that if the researcher walked into a management meeting in

Poole and shouted “attention”, half the people there would stand up and salute. Role titles such as “staff officer” are directly taken over from those used in the Royal Navy.

So in this context “lifeboat man” is not just a descriptive term, it is a resistant or at least differentiated identity by comparison with the senior echelons of the RNLI:

“The RNLI [centrally] is virtually mostly retired Royal Navy officers. So there’s a terrible arrogance in them and they talk to you as if you’re crew of a battle cruiser, you know.” (Fionn, Second Coxswain)

There are within this at least two rather particular issues that inflect the way that the interviewees talked about their lifeboat work. One is that part of the research was undertaken at stations in the Republic of Ireland, which has some significance for how people might relate to the British military. The RNLI is unusual in having always been, and continuing to be, an organization spanning both Britain and Ireland. Hence:

“You still see the crown, the RNLI with the crown flag flying over lifeboat stations in the Republic and that to me transcends politics and all that problem, you know. It’s great.” (Phil, Crewmember)

Although the RNLI in this way “transcends” the history of the two countries, in our view the distinction of a Royal Navy dominated HQ and a local identity as a lifeboat man has a different resonance in Ireland.

These particularities are worth mentioning because it is important to understand that identities always involve a complex mixture of resources and discourses and although in this paper we are focussing on place that is not to deny other matters such as national and gender identities. Even so, as demonstrated above the empirical material was clearly weighted towards the nexus of issues around locality, family, community and tradition. These are the mosaic of resources for place-identity, and what makes this space a place.

Concluding discussion

Current knowledge about identity and place has generally focused on either the construction of identity in relation to place, or the construction of space as a meaningful place. This paper has sought to synthesize these insights so as to show that place and identity interact in a recursive, dynamic way. That is, identity can be built on place; but place is invested with meaning by identity. In focussing on place-identity, we are emphatically not arguing that identity is simply or even primarily about place. The issue is rather to see how place sits within a “mosaic” of sources or resources through which identity is constructed and maintained. This means that place in turn is constructed and maintained through those sources and resources, and indeed the emotional attachment to place is clearly evident in the narratives relayed above. The meanings and mosaic comprises (at least) family and kinship, community, geography (especially, the sea), as well as place. Moreover, all of these are temporally, historically situated. We have used the narrative categories of “a place by the sea”, “the place where I grew up” and “the place where I come from” to organize our findings. The first category shows that local knowledge is accorded expertise and serves as an “identity anchor” (Fraher & Gabriel, 2014) as something for individuals to aspire to. That this is a specific, maritime place centrally defines the crews and also creates linkages between the stations so as to make the coast. To see what this might mean, consider the case of Joseph:

Vignette 1: Joseph’s story

Joseph joined the lifeboat 23 years ago after he was approached by the local coxswain who was looking for volunteers with seafaring experience. In paid employment he worked at sea on a month-on month-off basis until his retirement five years ago. He is the only member of his family involved with the lifeboats. His narrative greatly emphasized the importance of intimately knowing the coast and waters of the areas in which lifeboat operates, and he described how only locals, through experiential learning, physically encountering the sea, can

understand the topography and predict what will happen next: ‘An eye to the sea at all times, she will do what you least expect. She will. We have had the best of mariners here and unless you know your waters, unless you know your patch, it will catch you out. So our job is to know exactly what the water will do then’. Seamanship here equates to experience, and the agency of this place, the sea, appears to have become known primarily through the mechanisms of fear and respect. ‘You cannot turn your back to her [the sea]’, he contended, ‘I had the thing of watching her for 20 years...I saw her in all her moods’. Leaving aside the anthropomorphism, his story gave great insight to the social identity of volunteers, particularly when trying to manage their own fear. He described how things could go wrong on the boat, and the less experienced crew will turn for reassurance to the more experienced, who must keep a stiff upper lip and an aura of relative nonchalance, in turn (re)producing their identity as experts in these waters, and shaping and sustaining the relative hierarchy on the boat.

Our second category (“the place where I grew up”) demonstrates how salient aspects such as the kinship connection and its associated emotive attachment is conducive to a pre-socialization period which informs the sense of the ideal self as imagined by significant others also in this place. Service to the community, and kudos from the community, reinforce the aspirational identity in this place. Our third category, “the place where I come from”, emphasizes place-identity as growing out of and continuing a tradition, and wrapped up in this, a sense of local, place-based independence and identity for those stations who are ostensibly organized by the central RNLI headquarters.

Neither place nor history (nor the other parts of the mosaic) are reducible to each other, nor is any one of them comprehensible without reference to the others. This is the crux of place-identity because socially and historically accreted meaning is fundamental to what differentiates this place from a “space”, devoid of meaning and symbolism. The expert local

knowledge of the sea in these particular places is handed down generationally; just as the local tradition of lifeboating is often embedded within family trees. To be “me” in this context is to inherit and transmit this mosaic and it is ineluctably not just about being part of a family or a community or a tradition but being part of a family, community or tradition – in this place. But where is this place? It is where these families, communities and traditions occur. We can see how all this comes together if we consider the case of David.

Vignette 2: David’s story

David is a coxswain in his station located on an isthmus in very isolated, rural part of the country. The nearest lifeboat station is 90 miles away and equally remote. The place name itself is a toponym and the coast is jagged with rocky outcrops. Sandbars, reefs, strong tides, big winds and high waves are characteristic of this region, and the natural harbour in which the lifeboat station is located is recognized as a safe haven; especially as access to other potential berthing spaces are variously described as narrow, tortuous and shallow. David was born here and his father and grandfather were fishermen. Lobster fishing is traditionally a main source of income in this place, and when asked why he got involved with the campaign for an RNLI lifeboat in the 1970s, he responded that on one occasion he was at home listening to the marine radio and heard a family calling for help. They had gone out to sea to recover lobster pots just before a gale, got in trouble and were drifting on to the cliffs with nobody there to help them. The family ‘were in the teeth of a gale and about to lose their lives...it made us feel desperate for a lifeboat...this is something that will never leave my mind’. The way that David described the helplessness of the family against the elements of nature, and the despondency of those listening without means to assist revealed something about the sense of belonging and purpose which gave great meaning to the experience narrated, and the subsequent achievement of fundraising for and building of a lifeboat station for the town. For

David, identity was formed and enacted in this expression of a sense of place – in this case, a dangerous place. This continuance of a social meaning of the space is also evident in the following example. Each year, the town holds a heritage week where local business set up stalls and country life is celebrated. This is a major opportunity for local fundraising, and David proudly recounts that this community has the highest donation rate per capita in all of the UK and Ireland – ‘we are the central stand and people gather around us’, indicating a sense of connectedness and integration with the social fabric, ‘we do something meaningful for the people here’, he explains.

The understanding of place as “location made meaningful” (Cresswell, 2004, p. 7) which underpins human geography is very evident in David’s story. The relations of geography and biography that is central to place-identity – “where I am, where I’ve been, where I’m going” – are very prominent in this narrative, and greatly contribute to the mosaic of sources and resources which enable him to tell the stories of lived, embodied experience as a way of forging an identity.

Earlier we quoted Doreen Massey to the effect that “there is the specificity of place which derives from the fact that each place is the focus of a distinct mixture of wider and more local social relations” (Massey, 1995, p. 156). Such theorizations are inevitably abstract: what they mean resides in the kinds of local social relations which we have outlined in this paper. If even this seems rather abstract, it should be said that within the interviews a large range of emotions – from anger to calm, anxiety to assurance, sadness to joy, passion, fear, pride and sorrow – were expressed. It is perhaps inevitable that an academic paper on identity, for all that it may try to capture such emotion, will be a rather bloodless affair. But it seemed clear that for those interviewed place-identity was highly affective and provided individuals with a sense of rootedness, coherence and distinctiveness. Calvard (2015, p. 654) argues that people “make

use of various places for supporting their well-being and sense of self”, and that can be seen here:

“I think for most people it is the pull of the fact that it’s got a proud tradition, that’s very important. I think that matters and I think it’s about what people do, the nature of people putting out to sea at a time when everyone else comes home. There is something about that that is very deep, I can’t quite explain it but it’s very deep, and you kind of...you know, you feel it. I think with a lot of people there is an emotional connection for sure... it kind of gets you and I think the more society becomes, I suppose, the way it’s moving, the more people hold onto this aspect of life, it kind of grounds you and gives you some purpose...and it actually restores your faith in people a little bit.” (Eithne, Director)

In summary, then, returning to our research questions we can see how (as regards question one) place has a role in the creation of identity. It is the specificities of the coast, the sea, and their dangers which helps to form identities as a lifeboatman, a maritime expert and so on. I am who I am in part because of the place where I am. Yet intimately interwoven with that we can see (as regards question two) that the meaning of place is bound up with that identity. The place is what it is because it is where I (and my family) exist (and have long existed). The ontology of place is co-constructed with identity: “being me” means “being me here”, and “here” means “the place where I am”.

Moving to the wider implications of this study, it has been argued that the challenge for scholarship on identity in management and organization studies is:

“...to develop novel and nuanced theoretical accounts, to produce rich empirical analyses that capture the inter-subjectivity of organizational life in a thoughtful and empathetic fashion, and to demonstrate how individual and collective self-constructions become powerful players in organizing processes and outcomes” (Alvesson et al., 2008, p. 7).

In aspiring to meet this challenge we have been mindful of the fact that place-identity has a specificity to it. We argue that it is precisely that specificity which makes it important for

identity; far from being neither here nor there it is emphatically “here” not “there”. However, it is our contention that the case discloses something of wider theoretical importance about place and identity and moreover, that in highlighting the particularities of how place and identity relate we are also highlighting the methodological need to approach these via case study, blending, where appropriate, concepts from other disciplines to seek insights which otherwise might be lost. Furthermore, it is not that a case study of place and identity is of limited purchase because it is particular to that place, it is that the particularity and nuances of place means that it can only be grasped on a case by case basis.

A major contribution of this paper is to move beyond the extant relatively static, objective, cognitive conceptualization of place-identity towards a more social, temporal, subjective and dynamic conceptualization, showing how place sits within a mosaic of sources and resources through which identity is constructed and maintained. The extant concept of place-identity has been criticized as portraying a monadic (Burkitt, 1991), isolated, sovereign individual (Dixon & Durrheim, 2000), and we have provided an antidote to that here. Moreover, rather than place being a category of identity next to social class, gender or family (Hauge, 2007), arguably, it is a dimension which runs through all these, providing much more than the mere “backdrop” (Proshansky et al., 1983) to human experience, as has also been demonstrated in various ways by de Vaujany and Vaast (2014), Wasserman and Frenkel (2015) and Courpasson et al. (2017). The mosaic-like quality of identity resources is crucial in that identity is not lived via the conceptual categories of academics (in which, say, place, family or community are neatly delineated) but through a complex amalgamation of such categories.

The core claim in this paper is that place and identity are inextricably linked since, as the quote with which we began this paper has it, “nothing we do is unplaced” (Casey, 1997, p. ix). This would even, paradoxically, be true of work in “non-places” (Augé, 1995) since these transient,

interchangeable locales (e.g. airports) are still places that intersect with identity. Even if, in such cases, the notions of family, community and tradition, are not relevant, others, such as mobility, kineticism and stickiness will be (Costas, 2013). This in turn means that beyond the theoretical claim that place and identity are holistically intertwined there is a methodological claim to be made: that studying their intertwinement necessarily entails attention to their specificity. A similar claim is made by Lawrence & Dover (2015) in their study of Canadian housing projects for HIV-AIDS sufferers.

The key issue here is not just the obvious one that the way that place impacts on identity is context specific. That does matter, because the answer to the first question with which this paper has been concerned (what role does place play in the formation and maintenance of identity?) is indeed context specific, and we have shown how it works in the case of the RNLI lifeboat stations. But it matters just as much for the second question (how is place itself constructed?) for a perhaps less obvious reason. That reason is that place as a theoretical concept is only meaningful when attention is given to the specific meanings attaching to it (Guthey et al., 2014). This is at the heart of the distinction between place and space which, following Gieryn (2000), Larson and Pearson (2012) and Calvard (2015), we suggested was to do with the unique conjunctures of things in a particular space which make it a place. This has important implications for conducting research into place-identity: we have to go to the places where those conjunctures occur.

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